

Chinese Writers in Iowa

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"The strength, the joy and the zeal are so typical of the American people's energy: brave as a lion and persistent as an eagle... These are optimistic and wholesome people."—Ting Ling, the Chinese writer¹

To many people in China, the name of the University of Iowa is just as familiar as that of Harvard or Oxford. In a remarkable way, many well-known Chinese authors have shared their memories of the University of Iowa through their writings. I first read about the University of Iowa shortly after the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s in China. At that time, stories about a North American university city, a famous International Writing Program, vast Midwest farmland, and the meandering Iowa River were quite refreshing to many Chinese readers whose minds had been tarnished by the relentless, feverish and tormenting ten years of China's Cultural Revolution.

Iowa City is unique among North American cities in having hosted a large number of most prominent Chinese writers of the late twentieth century. From the early 1960s, seventy-eight well-known Chinese writers from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other parts of Asia came to Iowa city under the sponsorship of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program or the Iowa Writers' Workshop. These writers came from drastically diverse social and cultural backgrounds, though they all shared the same Chinese lan-

¹From "The Football Game" by Ting Ling. In *The World Comes to Iowa: International Anthology*, edited by Paul Engle, Rowena Torre Villas and Hualing Nieh Engle. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987), p.178. In this story, Ting Ling depicted a football game that she watched at the University of Iowa.

guage in writing. To many of them Iowa City was a place where fresh literary ideas sparkled and the camaraderie in Chinese literary creative writing was formed. Iowa City is also a birthplace of some of the most important works of contemporary Chinese literature.

The significance of Iowa City in the development of late twentieth century Chinese literature compelled me, as curator of the Chinese studies collection in the University of Iowa, to think of starting a collection consisting of the works and manuscripts of all the Chinese writers who have literary ties with the University of Iowa.

In October, 1991, the University of Iowa Libraries authorized the creation of a Chinese writers special collection consisting of the complete works and selected manuscripts authored by Chinese writers who have participated in the International Writing Program or the Iowa Writers' Workshops. On November 19, 1991, Sheila Creth, the University Librarian, wrote to all seventy-eight Chinese writers calling on them to donate to or provide the University of Iowa Libraries with their complete works and selected manuscripts. The objectives of this project are to document the cultural connection between the University of Iowa and the Chinese writers, to permanently store important historical records in late twentieth century Chinese literature, and to enhance the University of Iowa's library resources for Chinese studies. It is expected that this collection will be unique among all North American Chinese collections, for it is built with the efforts of its authors and documents an important history in twentieth century Chinese literature. All materials received will be added to the Department of Special Collections in the Main Library of the University of Iowa.

Many Chinese writers responded enthusiastically to the creation of this Chinese writers special collection. In his letter to the University Libraries, Po Yang, the renowned Chinese writer (author of *The Ugly Chinaman*) wrote, "I hope University of Iowa can some day become one of the world's leading centers for the study and research of Chinese literature. Your today's efforts are leading to that fame for your university in

the future.”² By the end of 1992, more than twenty writers from the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong had sent to the University Libraries their works and manuscripts of over 600 volumes. These works and manuscripts bear the autographs of their authors. Chen Ming, husband of the late distinguished Chinese woman writer Ting Ling (author of *Miss Sophie’s Diary* and *The Sun Shines over the Shanggan River*), sent the works and selected manuscripts of his wife to the University Libraries. He also wrote, “I am most excited to hear the touching news that the University of Iowa Libraries is creating this Chinese Writers Collection which will promote the understanding between the American and the Chinese peoples. I believe this has been a long wish of my late wife Ting Ling, and I support your efforts whole-heartedly.”

Works and manuscripts that have been or will be included in the collection are mostly creative writings in the form of novels, poetry, and autobiography. Some works fall into the category of academic publications or academic novels on Chinese history and politics. A small portion of the collection is composed of other important Chinese monographs previously donated to the University of Iowa Libraries from some Chinese writers’ personal collections.

Authors of this collection represent the finest literary minds of twentieth century China. Among the authors of older generations in this collection whose creative writing started early this century is Ting Ling (1904-1986), familiar to scholars and students of contemporary Chinese literature and history. One of the most prominent women writers in modern China, Ting Ling rose to fame in creative literary writing in the 1920s, with her first important work *Miss Sophie’s Diary* published in 1928. In this work she depicted the psychology of a young woman infatuated with a young man whose handsome exterior

²The transliteration system of Wade-Giles is used in this article, since it is adopted by most North American libraries in transcribing Chinese personal names and book titles, though more common is the system of Pinyin for Chinese transliteration used widely in academic publications today.

of a medieval knight belies a despicable soul. This was a ground-breaking work in the Chinese literary scene at that time, since no one had dared to describe the sexual fantasies of a young woman so openly and so candidly. Ting Ling's various later works encapsulate the history of modern China through decades of political revolution and cultural turmoil. Her most well-known novel *The Sun Shines on the Shanggan River* (*T'ai yang chao tsai Shanggan ho shang*) portrays the historic land reform that was carried out in China after the communist takeover. This novel marked the ideological and artistic transition of Ting Ling from her earlier stories of the sentimentality and subjectivity of a lonely young woman to the turbulent and severe political reality of modern China, a transformation that is typical of most Chinese writers who lived through unprecedented upheavals in modern Chinese history.

The Chinese writers collection includes some noted authors of the Post Mao-Era or the period after 1976.³ Pai Hua (1930-) is one of the most outspoken critics of the Maoist Era which is known for its dominance of a dogmatic and mechanical implementation of narrowly-defined determinist and anti-humanist ideology. His works are filled with burning humanism that was totally foreign in the literature of the previous Maoist Era. In his famous work *Bitter Love* (*K'u lien*), Pai Hua explores the underlying causes of the problems in the Chinese communist system and questions the blind loyalty that many Chinese intellectuals had for the system.

Another prominent writer of this era is Liu Pin-yen (1925-), a distinguished Chinese journalist. His work *Between Men and Monsters* (*Jen yao chih chien*) instilled a breath of fresh air into the stifled literary atmosphere of the Post-Mao Era. Written in the form of a short story, Liu's exposé of the large scale corruption of a women's cadre shocked those in the power of the government. He writes with a journalistic objectivity and respect for

³This is based on the classification of the literary periods in modern China defined in Michael S. Duke, *Blooming and Contending: Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

truth and "considers himself to be a realist writing in the tradition of nineteenth century European realism and the modern Chinese tradition of social criticism."⁴ Together with many other works, Liu created what was later called "the ironies of history" in a unique genre of reportage literature in China.⁵ The *New York Times* called him "China's most respected writer both for his political courage and the forcefulness in prose...."⁶ Among the works that Liu donated to the University of Iowa Libraries Chinese Writers Special Collection is his more recent book *Tell the World What Happened in China and Why* (with Ruan Ming and Xu Gang), in which he investigates the current political events in China and the bloody suppression of the Tiananmen Square mass movement.

Two other well-known mainland Chinese writers of this collection are Wang Meng (1934-) and Chang Hsien-liang (1936-). Wang's first important work *A Young Man Arrives at the Organization Department* (*Tsu chih pu hsin lai ti nien ch'ing jen*) published in 1956, depicts the clash between youthful idealistic revolutionaries and older entrenched Party bureaucrats. This aroused the ire of many party leaders. Miraculously, Mao Tse-tung himself in a speech given at the Supreme State Council in February 1957 cited this work as an example of the need for the relaxation of control over public expression to facilitate the on-going Hundred Flower Movement, a political maneuver that turned out to be what Mao called an "open conspiracy" to trap and persecute thousands of Chinese intellectuals who expressed their political views and contempt for political corruptions. As one of those victims, Wang was accused of being an anti-communist rightist and was forced to undergo "reform through labor" in the countryside. After 1976, Wang began to publish again, and he wrote a number of prize-winning works including *The Most Precious* (*Tsui kao kui ti*), *The Barber's Tale* (*Yu yu ts'un ts'ao hsin*), and *The Butterfly* (*Hu*

⁴Ibid, p. 98.

⁵Ibid

⁶Quoted from Liu Pin-yen, "Tell the World": *What Happened in China and Why*. (New York: Pantheon, 1989), inside cover.

tieh). Wang Meng is known for his outspoken position on creative freedom in China. In 1986, he was appointed Minister of Culture by the Chinese government. His marriage with the government did not last long when he was removed from his post shortly after the Tiananmen Square massacre in the summer of 1989.

Chang Hsien-liang, with his uninhibited style in words and action, created a unique style of his own in Chinese creative writing. In a speech entitled "The Artistic Quest of China's Authors Today" given during his visit to the University of Iowa in 1987, he said, "The great majority of contemporary Chinese literary works neglect a most important law of the use of the language: economy. Our language is short on ambiguity, subtle hints and multiple meanings. It is short on understatement and humor. Writers tend to write everything, leaving nothing to the reader's imagination."⁷ He feels that China's creative writing has been dormant for many years, and now must compete with literatures of other countries. Chang's works often blend image, words, and the natural beauty of China's west land, and leave much for reader's thought. His first prize-winning work *Soul and Body* (*Ling yu jou*), later known as *A Herdsman's Story* (*Mu ma jen*) when it became a feature film, made Chang a national celebrity. His other works include *Bitter Springs* (*Hisao er pu ta hu*), depicting the life of a truck driver in the wild land of China's west, and *Mimoda* (*Lü hua shu*), telling the story of a young man just released from prison. His best known work is *Half of Man is Woman* (*Nan jen ti i pan shih nü jen*), which, when first published in China in 1985, caused alarm and controversy for its audacity in depicting sexuality as man's basic instinct.

In addition to those distinguished writers from mainland China, the collection contains works of many important Chinese writers from Taiwan. Pai Hsien-yung (1937-) represents the generation of modern writers who were born in mainland China, grew up in Taiwan, and received graduate education in

⁷Vineta Colby, *World Authors 1980-1985*. (New York: Wilson, 1991), p. 924.



Selected works by the renowned Chinese writer Po Yang

the United States. His most important work “Taiwan People” (*Taipei jen*) depicts many mainlanders who fled to Taiwan after the Nationalist defeat in 1949. Through a series of incidents, he portrays the turbulent life, visions, and rituals shared by what he calls the “broad masses of people”, men and women who sought refuge in Taiwan in the 1950s. Pai’s works are widely appreciated by people in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China.

Po Yang (1920-) is another accomplished Taiwanese writer of this collection. During the 1950s and 1960s, he took fiction writing as a profession, and wrote newspaper columns in which he fiercely exposed and attacked the unhealthy aspects of Chinese culture. On March 8, 1968, he was arrested by the Nationalist Party government on charges that he had undermined the affections between the people and the government, a charge that could have brought a death sentence to him. During his nine-year imprisonment, he did extensive research in history and wrote poems. Upon his release from prison in 1977, he immediately became one of the most respected writers in Taiwan. Being one of the most prolific Chinese writers of the

century, Po Yang wrote more than one hundred volumes of books. His most important work *The Ugly Chinaman* (*Ch'ou lou ti chung-kuo jen*), written from his speech given at the University of Iowa, created much-debated controversy and sensation all over the Chinese-speaking world. He was given a hero's welcome when he visited China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and the United States.

Lo Men (1929-) and Jung-tzu (1928-), a unique poet-couple, are the newest participants of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. They came to Iowa in the fall of 1992. Being a daughter of a clergyman, Jung-tzu's Christian education influenced her writing to a great extent, as evidenced by the Biblical references and Hebraic rhythms in her poems. Her first volume *The Blue Bird* (*Ch'ing liao chi*) made her the first significant woman poet in modern Taiwan who explored life with a modern woman's sensitivity. Her later works include *South in July*, *Jung-tzu Poems* (*Jung-tzu shih ch'ao*), *Only If We Have Roots* (*Chih yao wo men yu ken*), and *Bird in Paradise* (*Tien t'ang liaa*). Lo Men, like Jung-tzu, has been an active Taiwan poet. Over the past three decades, Lo Men has published ten volumes of poems including *Aurora*, *The Tower of Death* (*Ssu wang chih t'a*), *Lo Men Poems* (*Lo Men shih chi*), and *The Whole World Stops Breathing at the Starting Point of Race* (*Cheng ko shih chieh t'ing chih hu hsi tsai ch'i p'ao hsien shang*). Rather unique in modern Chinese literature, this couple jointly received the Korat Award from the United Laureate International in 1966, and were nominated the "Distinguished Literary Couple of China".

Most noteworthy among all the Chinese authors of this collection is Hualing Nieh Engle, co-founder of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. Born in Hupei, China, in 1925 by the Yangtzu River, she survived the eight years of the Sino-Japanese war, and endured the turbulent life in Taiwan before she settled down in the United States in the 1960s. She came to the University of Iowa as a Visiting Writer



A gathering of Chinese and American writers in New York City, N.Y., November 1981. First row (from left to right): Robert Payne, William Jay Smith, Ting Ling, Ch'en Ming, Paul Engle. Second row (from left to right): Chiang Hsün (third left), W.S. Merwin (fourth left), Susan Sontag (fifth left), Hualing Nieh Engle (sixth left), Sung Tse-lai (seventh left)

in 1964 and later founded the International Writing Program together with her late husband, American poet Paul Engle. Rich experience, shrewd observation, and the cultivation of both Chinese and American cultures enabled her to write more than twenty books including the well-known *Two Women of China*, *Mulberry and Peach* (*Sang ch'ing yü t'ao hung*), *Thirty Years Later* (*San shih nien hou*), *Black, the Most Beautiful Color* (*Hei she, he she, tsui mei li ti yen she*), and *People in the Twentieth Century* (*Jen tsai erh shih shih chi*). She is also the author of *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*. She played the role of a hostess for all the other Chinese writers who visited Iowa for over two decades.

This Chinese writers special collection will expand until all the works of the seventy-eight and future Chinese authors who have participated in the International Writing Program are collected. The University of Iowa Libraries has made a long-term commitment to store, preserve, and make available the works and manuscripts of those Chinese writers.

The cultural connection between the Chinese writers and the University of Iowa is best reflected in Wang Meng's story, "Farewell, Iowa":

"Good-bye, Iowa, so long. When I go back to Beijing and walk along the Royal Residence Street or New Crossroad, I can take a mental trip perhaps along your Dubuque Street, Washington Street, Church Street, or Market Street... perhaps, I will pray for your people to have a peaceful sleep in the late hours of the night. Bless you, my Iowa!"

From "Farewell, Iowa" In *People's Literature*, 1981: no. 3.

Each and every Chinese writer has left his or her footprint in Iowa. Or rather, their footprints, memories, and good wishes for Iowa are melted in their works housed in this Chinese Writers Special Collection, bearing witness to the unforgettable history and providing a valuable resource for the study of 20th Century Chinese literature.

APPENDIX

Authors of the Chinese Writers Special Collection

A Ch'eng, Ai Ch'ing, Chang I-kung, Chang Hsiang-hua, Chang Hsien-liang, Chang Ts'o, Ch'en Hsüan-wen, Ch'en Ming, Ch'en Pai-ch'en, Ch'en Ying-chen, Ch'en Yun-wen, Cheng Ch'ou-yü, Chi Chi, Ch'i Teng Sheng, Chiang Hsün, Chin Sung, Chung Hsiao-yang, Feng Chi-ts'ai, Ho Ta, Hsiang Yang, Hsiao Ch'ien, Hsiao Sa, Hsü Ch'ih, Hu Mei-tzu, Huang Fan, Huang Meng-wen, Kao Chun, Kao Hsin-chiang, Ku Chao-shen, Ku Hua, Kuan Kuan, Lan Ling, Li Ang, Li I, Lin Huai-min, Liu Pin-yen, Liu So-la, Lo Men, Lo Yen, Nieh Hualing, Ou-yang Tzu, Pai Hua, Pai Hsien-yung, P'an Yao-min, Pei Tao, Po Yang, Pi Shuo-wang, Shao Yen-hsiang, Shen Jung, Shui Ching, Sung Tse-lai, Tai T'ien, Ting Ling, Ts'an Hsüeh, T'u Chih-chüan, Tung Nien, Wang An-i, Wang Chen-ho, Wang Mei, Wang Meng, Wang Shen-ch'uan, Wang To, Wang Tseng-chi, Wang Wen-hsing, Wen Chien-liu, Wong Woon-hua, Wu Je Erh T'u, Wu Tsu-kuang, Wei T'ien-ts'ung, Wu Sheng, Ya-hsien, Yao I-wei, Yang Ch'ing-ch'u, Yang Mu, Yeh Wei-lien, Yü Kuang-chung, Yüan Ch'ung-ch'ung, Yüan Tse-nan.